

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4802

October 19, 2004

Dear Mr. President,

Recent studies and press reports about the needs of our military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are compelling. I am writing to ask you to immediately reconsider your funding priorities for the Veterans Administration (VA) for this fiscal year budget and the next one.

The VA's mission is to properly care for our current veterans and our new veterans, including the National Guard and Reserves who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. President, I am increasingly concerned that the VA cannot meet the health care needs of our veterans because your administration has not provided the necessary resources for the Department. As your own VA Secretary testified before Congress in February, the VA needed \$1.2 billion more than your budget called for. If the funding shortage was apparent then, it is even more pronounced now, as more and more veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan seek the health care that they deserve and have earned.

At this critical moment in the effort to provide health care for our veterans, I believe that our veterans and the American people should receive full disclosure about the Department's true needs. I would appreciate your providing me information and fiscal estimates about the resources that the VA requires in order to respond promptly to both increased claims for disability benefits and VA health care; especially Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because mental health experts are estimating that 15 percent or more of our returning combat troops may experience PTSD.

Specifically, I would like your fresh assessment of the VA needs to handle new disability claims, as well as background on any problems in sharing information between DOD and VA. At the end of August 2004, there were over new 326,000 claims awaiting adjudication, 73,000 more claims than were pending at the end of fiscal year 2003. Despite great efforts made by your staff, the incoming workload is growing at a faster rate than they can process. I would appreciate an answer for the following questions.

1. How many claims do you anticipate receiving next year, paying special attention to the number of active duty and activated reserves who will be returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan with eligibility for VA benefits?
2. Although greater efficiency has been achieved, the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) has still been unable to handle the influx of claims. How many additional full-time employees (FTE) would be required to handle this increase in workload?



Despite the fact that the U.S. remains at war and many service members have been injured and continue to be injured, your administration submitted a budget request for FY 05 that suggests the reduction of 540 FTE from VBA and continued cuts to initiatives that assist employees to do their work more accurately and efficiently. Do you anticipate cuts in staffing in next year's budget, or will there be adequate staff to meet the demands of disabled veterans?

On health care, I would like to know specifically how VA is preparing to handle health care for returning military personnel, including the more than 70,000 National Guard and Reserves who will be eligible for at least two years of care -- and perhaps more, if their illness is combat-related.

Given estimates of the potential for an increase in PTSD cases, I am concerned that the recent GAO report finds that VA may not have the data necessary to thoroughly plan and prepare its PTSD care for returning veterans. What action is underway to remedy this concern?

I am impressed by your VA Secretary's candor about the needs of the Veterans Administration, especially on health care, because they have been pivotal in keeping Congress informed. Even though the budget for this fiscal year has not been completed, we must begin to consider VA's needs for next year. We must build the foundation for adequate funding for our veterans, including those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Again, I ask that your administration provide information on the financial needs for VA benefit claims and health care, given the new circumstances since February. It is crucial for us to be honest with the American people about all the costs involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the funding challenges that VA has in serving the newest veterans, including our National Guard and Reserves. I believe the American people share my view that our veterans deserve nothing less than the highest quality of care and concern after their brave service in defense of our freedom. Best wishes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jay Rockefeller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

John D. Rockefeller IV

The Honorable George W. Bush  
President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500